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THE PEARL

BY GUSTAV KOBBE

A PEARL worn by a woman is more than a mere jewel. It is the most distinctively feminine article of adornment there is. Sexless, for after all a pearl is a thing, not a person, yet it ever has seemed so much a part of the personality of the woman it adorns, that it has come to partake of sex and may be regarded as the eternal feminine among jewels.

To begin with, pearl bearing mollusks are luxurious creatures. They protect their delicate bodies, covering the interior of their shells with a smooth lustrous material, steeped in rainbow hues of beautiful yet subdued opalescence. No matter how dull, how heaped with coral, or overgrown with sponges or seaweeds the outside shell may be, all is clean and beautiful within the house, which is adorned with nacre or mother-of-pearl. Is it a wonder that a jewel so cleanly and delicately housed from its very birth and so immaculate in its progress toward perfection, appeals so strongly to woman with her sensitive nature?

Even the pearl gatherers, at least those of the highest skill and type, seem to have respect for their occupation, as if they realized the rare distinction fate held in store for these jewels of the deep as the favorite ornaments of women. For the best type of Arab divers are very careful of themselves. They dry their body thoroughly with towels on coming out of the water. They indulge in intervals of rest during the day's work. Even while in the water, between dives, they may be seen enjoying the luxury of a cheroot or pipe, or a cigarette may be passed from mouth to mouth. During the period of work these divers are notably abstemious. After devotions at sunrise and a light breakfast of perhaps dates or rice and coffee, they begin the fishery. About noon they knock off for coffee, prayers and an hour's

siesta, and then resume work for several hours. The day's work over, they face Meccaward with the customary prayers, then rest and eat a substantial meal usually of dates and fish roasted over a charcoal fire.

Thus, with these gatherers of pearls, is everything well ordered, neat and cleanly. And they have faced Meccaward and prayed! A benison, perchance, upon the pearls.

Pearls were so highly prized by the ancient Greeks that they adorned their images of the goddess of Love with them—and not with mere sculptured imitations but with the real jewels themselves. This is beautifully shown in the lovely Tyszkiewicz bronze statuette of Aphrodite, since 1900 in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. This bronze Venus has even yet a pearl in fairly good state of preservation suspended from each ear by a spiral thread of gold that passes quite through the gem and also through the lobe of the ear. This Aphrodite has been described as "the most beautiful bronze Venus known."

And speaking of this bronze Aphrodite is a reminder that pearls, once the property of aristocratic Greeks and luxurious Romans, still are in existence, and some of them in a fairly good state of preservation. An example easily to be seen by every New Yorker is the necklace of pearls and gold, probably dating from the third century B. C., in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The love of the woman named Gellia for her pearls is familiar to all who know their Martial. "By no gods or goddesses does she swear, but by her pearls," writes this author of Gellia. "These she calls her sisters and brothers. She loves them more dearly than her two sons. Should she by some chance lose them, the miserable woman would not survive an hour." Seneca also relieved his mind

regarding what he deemed woman's extravagance in these jewels. "Pearls offer themselves to my view. Simply one for each ear? No! The lobes of our ladies have attained a special capacity for supporting a great number. Two pearls alongside of each other, with a third suspended above, now form a single earring! the crazy fools seem to think that their husbands are not sufficiently tormented unless they wear the value of an inheritance in each ear."

Yet was neither Gellia nor any of the women berated by Seneca extravagant, since no pearl has ever gone begging for its price. The woman who wears the value of an inheritance in each ear has two inheritances, one from each lobe, to leave her children; and if she has even more fine pearls than these she has so many more inheritances to pass on to her descendants. For time never was when fine pearls would not fetch fine prices. In fact, anyone who thinks that pearls today are high-priced as compared with former times is mistaken. For the valuations of pearls that have come down as traditions from antiquity, seem far more fabulous than those that appear to prevail today. Suetonius relates that the Roman general, Vitellus, paid all the expenses of a military campaign from funds derived from the sale of a single pearl from his mother's ear.

Even so prosaic a thing as a scientific name suggests the charm of association between woman and the pearl. For to *Margaritifera*, from the Persian *Murwari* and signifying the pearl oyster, we owe the beautiful and romantic name of Marguerite, which thus means a pearl.

Again, consider the exquisite origins attributed to pearls by writers of fancy and how they lead one to associate them with all that is delicate and appealing in woman. Their chaste and subdued beauty has led poets of many countries to seek their origin in tears—tears of angels, water-nymphs, the lovely and the devoted. Scott writes of "pearls by naiads wept," while Shakespeare speaks of "the liquid drops of tears that woman has shed, reappearing again, transformed to orient pearl, advantaging their loan

with interest of a ten times double gain of happiness." With a handy volume of quotations one might fill pages with poetic references to pearls; those gems whose lustre so closely resembles that of the limpid, sparkling dewdrop as it receives the rays of the morning sun that the ancients conceived pearls to be formed from drops of dew or rain. This poetic legend has it that at certain seasons of the year, the pearl-oysters, rising to the surface of the water at sunrise, open their shells and breathe in the fresh, sparkling dew of early morn, each dewdrop being, in the course of time, transformed into a lustrous pearl, unless the air and sunlight are not received in sufficient quantities, when the pearl will not attain perfection and remains faulty in form, color and lustre. Remarkable and even absurd as this fanciful theory may seem, it once was almost universally accepted and its mysticism still fascinates those who recognize human and especially feminine attributes in the pearl.

Instances have been given of the love for pearls on the part of the women of antiquity. But in all times and especially during the fifteenth century enormous quantities of pearls were worn by persons of rank and fashion. A remarkable 1483 portrait of Margaret, wife of James III of Scotland, which is now preserved at Hampton Court, shows her wearing such wonderful pearl ornaments that she might well be called Margaret from her decorations. Her head-dress undoubtedly is the most remarkable pearl decoration in portraits of that century.

In the middle ages an aristocratic use for pearls was found in the costly bindings of the illuminated missals and chronicles, bindings finished in the highest degree of excellence and at vast expense. The script artist and miniaturist might devote his whole life to completing a single manuscript, so great was the detail and so exquisite the finish; and then the jeweler and binders would devise an appropriately costly housing. A remarkable specimen of these manuscript books in America is the Ashburn-

ham manuscript of the Four Gospels, owned by Mr. Morgan.

And as this book is owned in America, let it be said here that the present fascination pearls have for American women is but a rekindling of a primitive passion on this continent. For long before America was made known to the rest of the world by the voyage of Columbus, pearls were highly prized. That their magic charm had taken an irresistible hold on the aborigines and on the more highly civilized inhabitants of Mexico and Peru, was shown in the palaces of Montezuma which were studded with pearls, while the Aztec kings possessed pearls of inestimable value. That they must have been collected all over the continent, even in prehistoric times, is evidenced by the large quantities discovered in the mounds of the Ohio Valley, which are among the most ancient works of man in America. As in the Old World, so in what we are pleased to call the New, they had been applied as decoration to idols, temples and palaces as well as used by men and women.

Thus it was that the principal immediate effect of Columbus's discovery and its resultant commerce was the great wealth of pearls which began to reach the Spanish traders. The Spaniards had sought gold. They found pearls. There were rich native fisheries on the coast of Venezuela, and later others were found on the Pacific Coast of Panama and Mexico, until venturous voyagers returned to Spain with such large collections of pearls that, in the language of one of the old chroniclers—"they were to every man like chaff." For many years America, now current in common speech as the land of money, was known in Seville, Cadiz and Europe generally as the land of pearls. Until the development of the mines in Mexico and Peru, the value of the pearls exceeded that of all the other loot combined. For who is there to say that it was not rank and often cruel robbery that was carried on in the fair name of commerce? In fact, for two centuries following the discovery of America, extravagance in personal adornment became a rage at European

courts, and the pearls exceeded in quantity that of all other times. They were worn in enormous numbers by persons of rank and fortune, as is apparent not only from antiquarian records and historical accounts, but from paintings and engravings of the time as well—from portraits of the Hapsburgs, the Valois, the Medicis, the Borgias, the Tudors and the Stuarts, all showing vast quantities of pearls, and, what is significant, relatively few other gems.

Of the great women of that period two were especially noted for their passion for pearls. These were Catherine of Medici and Queen Elizabeth. Glance at almost any of their portraits. They are nearly always represented as wearing elaborate pearl ornaments. Their pictures show to what extent they carried their passion for pearls. Other women, not far behind them, included Mary Stuart, Maria of Medici and Henrietta Maria. And while it breaks upon my motif, which is the femininity of the pearl, I must record that men also wore pearls to an extravagant extent. Nearly all of the portraits of Francis I, Henry II, Charles IX, and Henry III of France; James I, and Charles I of England, besides of other celebrities, show at least one great pear-shaped pearl in one ear, while many portraits show pearls on the hats, cloaks, gloves and other coverings. The "Antiquarian Repertory" is authority for the statement that, when the Duke of Buckingham went to Paris, in 1625, to bring over Henrietta Maria as queen to Charles I, he had, in addition to twenty-six other suits, "a rich suit of purple satin, embroidered all over with rich orient pearls, the cloak made after the standard mode, with all things suitable, the value whereof will be twenty thousand pounds, and this, it is thought, shall be for the wedding day at Paris."

This digression from the feminine motif may justify the introduction here of some points, more or less technical perhaps, but far from uninteresting. For example, the qualifications that determine the value of a pearl. These are, that it should be perfectly round, pear-shaped, drop-shaped, egg-shaped or but-

ton-shaped, and as even in form as though it were turned on a lathe. Its skin must be perfectly clear and of a decided color or tint—white, pink, creamy, gray brown or black. If white it must be unclouded and have neither flaw nor haze; nor should the skin have, in the slightest degree, the appearance of being opaque or dead. Absolutely free from all cracks, scratches, spots, flaws, indentations, shadowy reflections and blemishes of any kind, it must possess, in addition, the peculiar lustre or “orient” characteristic of the gem, a skin unbroken, and no evidence of having been polished.

The color of pearls has no connection whatever with their lustre, but is the same as that of the shell in which they are formed. Black pearls come from the black shells of Mexico and pink pearls from the pink-hued shells found in the Bahamas. Ceylon pearls usually are white. From Sharks Bay come yellow or straw-colored and from Venezuela pearls of yellow tinge. Other localities yield pearls simulating every tint of the rainbow, besides black and white. The most common, and fortunately the most desirable color, is white or rather silver or rather *claire de lune*. “La gran Margherita,” Dante calls it. Yellow, pink and black pearls also are numerous; and there are piebald pearls—a portion white and the rest pink or brown or black. The authors of the book already referred to mention a large bean-shaped pearl of great lustre, one-half of which was white and the other quite black, the dividing-line being sharply defined in the plane of the greatest circumference. From Mexico, the South Sea Islands and the American rivers come pearls noted for the great variety of their coloration in practically every known tint and shade.

Even the foregoing paragraph in itself suffices to convey the information that in geographic range, the sources of pearls are widely distributed. Each of the six continents yields its tribute to woman. But the most profitable pearl fisheries are restricted in area. Probably most valuable as well as most ancient

are those of the Persian Gulf, which give employment to some 30,000 divers.

The great pearl producer in the family of pearl-oysters is the *Margaritifera vulgaris*. For centuries it has sustained the great pearl fisheries of Ceylon, India and Persia, and still yields the bulk of pearls on the market. While it produces relatively few large ones, rarely exceeding twelve grains in weight, its pearls usually are silvery white, and command the highest prices for their size, because of their beautiful form and superior lustre. Excepting the Venezuelan species, *Margaritifera vulgaris* is the only pearl-oyster supporting extensive fisheries exclusively for pearls. In all other species the value of the shells is considerable and in some localities represents several times as much as the income from the pearls.

Remarkable stories are told of the length of time that pearl divers can remain under water. Some of these stories sound decidedly “fishy.” It is said that in equal depths the Arab fishermen remain under water longer than those of India who work the Ceylon fishery. But the latter descend more frequently. When preparing to remain long under water, the fisherman takes in large quantities of air.

The length of time divers remain submerged in an average depth of seven or eight fathoms rarely exceeds sixty seconds. Some may remain seventy, eighty or even ninety seconds on special occasions, and there is a fully substantiated instance from Manaar, of an Arab diver having remained 109 seconds in seven fathoms of water. Even the date, April 13, 1887, is given and the feat was witnessed and reported by Captain James Donnan, inspector of the fishery. In a diving contest in the Persian Gulf only one man out of hundreds who competed, remained down 110 seconds; the depth, however, is not indicated.

The demand for pearls by American women has resulted not only from the increased wealth of the country, but also from its development in taste and culture. With the love for art has come the appreciation of pearls and their

exquisite suggestion of femininity. Few jewels were worn here before the Civil War. There was no great wealth and simplicity of taste in personal decoration prevailed. With the post-bellum fortunes and splurge came a great demand for gems, and the most showy ones were selected, especially diamonds. This demand was met by the discovery of the South African mines with their great yield. Diamonds became so popular here that an enormous diamond in the shirt-front was properly regarded as the sure emblem of American vulgarity. But for some thirty years and especially during the last decade, in Europe as well as in America, in fact wherever gems are worn, luxury has found in pearls a refinement, associated with richness and beauty, and exceeding that of diamonds and other crystal gems, until now they may be said to have taken the highest rank among jewels. This change in fashion, the increase in wealth and consequent vastly greater demands and higher prices, have resulted in greatly extending the field of search, and many new localities have been brought into the field of production.

The first awakening to a realization of the value of fresh-water pearls in America occurred in 1857, when several beautiful pearls came into the market from the central part of New Jersey. The story is told in "The Book of the Pearl" and its scene, of all places in the world, is Paterson. A shoemaker named David Howell, who lived on the outskirts of that city occasionally relieved the monotony of his trade by a fishing excursion to some neighboring stream, where he would usually collect a "mess" of mussels. Returning from one of these visits to Notch Brook in the spring of 1857, the mussels were fried with the usual abundance of grease and heat. After this preparation, and when they were opened for the cobbler's feast, one of them was found to contain a large, round pearl weighing "nearly 400 grains," which possibly might have proven the finest of modern times, had not its lustre and beauty been destroyed by the heat and grease. Had the pearl

been discovered in time, its value might have exceeded \$25,000, so that poor Howell's fried mussels made one of the most expensive of suppers.

Hoping to duplicate this wonderful find, Howell collected and searched other mussels and his example was followed by several of his neighbors. Within a few days a magnificent pink pearl was found by a Paterson carpenter named Jacob Quackenbush. It weighed 93 grains, was sold in New York for \$1500, and later in Paris for 12,500 francs (\$2500) to a French dealer who disposed of it to the then young and beautiful Empress Eugenie, from whom and its own great lustre, is derived the name "Queen Pearl." Today its value would be many times its original purchase price.

In fact, pearls have never gone down in price, but have steadily advanced in value surely during the last three centuries and probably for a much longer period. To buy a beautiful pearl is as safe as it is to buy a painting by one of the great masters. It will be worth more tomorrow than it is today. Pearls of one hundred grains are even more rare at the present time than are diamonds of one hundred carats. Until about seventy-five years ago the diamonds of the world weighing one hundred carats or over could be counted on the fingers. But since the opening of the African mines, in 1870, the number of large diamonds has increased at a much greater ratio than have the pearls of one-quarter of their weight. It would thus seem that pearls of great size are worth four times as much as diamonds of equal weight.

The Orient having been a source of supply for pearls since ancient days, there is little wonder that great collections of these gems are to be found in the East and many allusions to them in its literature. Fantastic theories regarding them, in ancient Chinese literature, credit them as originating in the brain of the fabled dragon; and as having been especially abundant during the reigns of the illustrious emperors. They were used as amulets and charms against fire and other disasters; they

are spoken of as so brilliant as to have been visible at a distance of nearly a thousand yards, and that rice could be cooked by the light from them. A pearl found near the beginning of the Christian era at Yangchow-fu, in the province of Kiang-su, was recorded as so lustrous that it was visible in the dark.

Coin and gem portraits of Persian queens often show ear-pendants of pearls. The remains of a necklace of pearls and other stones dating from the fourth century B.C., were found in the sarcophagus of an Achaemenid princess exhumed at Susa or Shuslan, the winter residence of the kings of Persia. This necklace, which likely is the most ancient pearl ornament still in existence, is in the Persian Gallery of the Louvre. Even without further evidence, it would be a warranted assumption that pearls were as widely known among the Iranians in antiquity as among the Hindus, since the Persian Gulf, like the Indian Ocean, has been famous for its fisheries from ancient times.

The wealth in jewels possessed by oriental monarchs, notables and dealers, which has been the theme of story and tradition time out of mind, may have been doubted in western countries. But whoever has witnessed or read accounts of important social functions or state occasions where East Indian rajahs or nabobs were present, can realize that the profusion of jewels which they wear simply is amazing to Western eyes. And why not? For these objects represent the hoarding of generations, handed down from father to son in long succes-

sion; with the additional and perfectly known value that whenever necessity arises, they can be turned into available funds.

Of the crystal gems—the diamonds, rubies, etc.—which practically are of unlimited longevity, existing thousands of years in unchanged condition, the earth contains as many as it ever did, save for those which have been discovered by men. It is not unreasonable to suppose that in the course of time a considerable percentage of the total will be discovered. But in both seas and rivers, the longevity of pearls is restricted.

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear."

Such gems may run their course of existence and depart unhonored and unsung. The harvest must be gathered with promptness or it is wasted. Most likely only a small percentage of the beautiful pearls produced in the green depths have gladdened human eyes.

There have been and are a few men who possess so delicate a touch or so fine a sense of feeling, that they can estimate the weight of a pearl simply by holding it in the hand. This accomplishment is said to have been possessed by Julius Cæsar. But though Cæsar's wife was supposed to be above suspicion, could he tell by an equally simple method, a glance of the eye, the worth, in character and consistency, of the woman whose pearl he was weighing in his hand?